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ABSTRACT

Realizing that all students have to deal with death at some time, yet receive no formal education in the subject, Alex Kramer, a high school teacher at Moon High School, Corapolis, Pennsylvania, decided to create a program which would give students an opportunity to study death and the process of dying as integral parts of life. Kramer's goals, designed for his behavioral science class of juniors and seniors, are to promote realistic attitudes about death and to dispel myths and fears associated with it. To achieve these objectives, death is studied from several perspectives. Students are visited by doctors, nurses, ambulance attendants, and a mortician, all of whom deal with different aspects of death. They read letters from wartime soldiers who faced the probability of their own death daily. Students tour cemeteries, hold class discussions on topics such as euthanasia and cryonics, and answer questionnaires on their own religion's response to death. To evaluate his class, Kramer requires his students to answer a questionnaire. It reveals that by treating death as a fact of life students fear death less and appreciate life more. (Author/CF)

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PROFILES OF PROMISE are designed to provide information on innovative social studies and social science projects, which teachers and administrators can use in their own classrooms or schools.

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Death and Dying-- A Living Study

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A field trip to a cemetery is not a typical social studies activity. Neither is a guest lecture by a mortician. However, at Moon High School in Coraopolis, Pennsylvania, these and several other unconventional activities are regularly included in a study unit on the subject of death.

The "Death and Dying" unit gives students an opportunity to study the process of dying and the fact of death as integral parts of life. Alex Kramer, originator and teacher of the unit, believes student response to the study shows that a traditionally taboo subject like death, when handled with sensitivity, can provide valuable learning experiences for high school students.

"DEATH" COMES TO MOON HIGH SCHOOL

The idea for a death education unit resulted from some personal reading Kramer was doing, particularly Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's book *On Death and Dying* (The Macmillan Co., 1970). It occurred to him that all students would have to deal with death at some time, yet students were receiving no formal education in the subject.

The topic seemed a natural one for Kramer's *Introduction to the Behavioral Sciences*, a one-semester elective course for juniors and seniors. The course already included such varied topics as the search for identity, race and prejudice, schizophrenia, and collective behavior. Death education added still another dimension to the study of human behavior.

Kramer began developing the unit by stating three objectives:

(1) To have students take a realistic look at death and dying as an inescapable part of life, and to help them develop a type of empathy toward death's manifestations.

(2) To have students become well adjusted on certain topics related to death and dying so that facts replace myths and half-truths in students' minds.

(3) To encourage students to spread their new-found knowledge beyond the classroom and to maintain interest in the subject after the unit is completed.

Determining objectives was simple when compared to the next task--locating materials to use in the unit. Kramer reports that his initial search turned up little published information on death education and even less material specifically aimed at teenagers. As a result, he began combing popular magazines, newspapers, and current book lists for information which would be useful in a high school classroom. Much of the material now used in the unit has been located by Kramer and students in their daily reading.

Kramer began his first "Death and Dying" unit in 1972 and has taught the unit as part of *Introduction to the Behavioral Sciences* each semester since. Over 200 students have taken the course to date. The unit is presently a four-week segment of the total course, and according to Kramer it is a "very busy four weeks."

"DEATH AND DYING"

When beginning the "Death and Dying" unit, students often confess to being apprehensive and even a little "scared" about the subject. To relieve the initial hesitancy, Kramer has devised a questionnaire which all students complete during the unit's first week (see pp. 2-3).

Kramer believes the use of this sort of introspective questionnaire serves several purposes. It helps him know what attitudes and feelings the students are bringing to the unit. It serves to stimulate interest in the topic, and it helps to pro-

note student-to-student discussion. At the end of the unit, students respond again to the same questions; a comparison of the responses indicates some of the attitude changes students experience.

The actual study unit is divided into six topics, each with specifically planned materials and activities. Following is a description of the curriculum used by Kramer.

Facing Up to Death. The matter of facing up to death is considered from the viewpoints of both the dying person and the relatives or friends of that person. Kramer has found materials written by Kubler-Ross helpful in dealing with the subject of grief. In Kubler-Ross's work as a mental health director, she and her colleagues interviewed more than 500 terminally ill patients. Her descriptions of the feelings and concerns of such patients elicits much classroom discussion. A film, *Living with Dying*, is also used as a discussion base.

Students consider how relatives or close friends of a critically ill person respond to death. Articles located by Kramer and the students emphasize the fact that most people are unprepared by society to deal with death. Critically ill people are taken to a hospital or nursing home before the actual time of death; consequently, modern families seldom have firsthand experience in dealing with impending death.

Although material is limited, some special attention is given to the subject of children's death and how children can be helped to accept death. This particular aspect of facing up to death was added to the curriculum when a student found an article on the subject which aroused considerable interest among class members.

Before Kramer began teaching "Death and Dying" he had prepared a unit entitled "Enemy Soldiers at War" for use in a European History course. He finds the unit also has important application to the "Death and Dying" unit. The material used in the unit includes excerpts from letters written by soldiers during wartime taken from two books, *German Students' War Letters* and *Last Letters from Stalingrad*.

Reading these letters, the students can explore the thoughts and emotions of men living with a high probability of death. Considering the dimensions of death by killing rather than by illness elicits a different set of responses from students.

After Death at the Hospital. Since death so commonly occurs in a hospital, the actual procedures following death in this setting are explored in depth. The primary source of information is a research report by Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss entitled "After Death in the Hospital" (The Free Press, 1972). The authors researched their subject by observing hospital staffs as they handled the details of body removal and as they interacted with family members after a patient's death.

Guest speakers are important to this topic. Kramer has invited both doctors and nurses to speak with the class about the roles they play following the death of a patient. The class has also heard from an ambulance attendant and a local coroner who described their responsibilities and experiences.

Funeral and Burial Practices. While there are many facets to the class's study of funeral and burial practices, Kramer feels perhaps the most stimulating activity is the visit to the classroom by a local funeral director. The teacher reports that students are generally quite negative toward the mortician's profession; they are quite concerned about funeral directors overcharging for their services.

The mortician who visits the class each semester apparently did so rather reluc-

Classroom activities



tantly the first time. Although he faced some tough questions from the students, he now feels speaking to the class gives him a chance to present his view of the profession. As a result of his class visits, the funeral director now invites students to visit his mortuary each semester.

The subject of cryonics has been of interest to many students, and a number have done outside reading to learn more about the process of freezing bodies. The ethical implications of such preservation are discussed in class.

Students also explore the practice of publishing memoriams in newspapers by reading a sample of local memoriams to determine their nature and purpose. American death customs are compared to the practices of other cultures after students view the film, *Death*, which deals with customs in several varied societies.

Each semester students take a walking tour of a cemetery which is located near Moon High School. The visit is no casual stroll; students are directed to observe certain aspects of the cemetery such as type and variety of headstones, burial dates, condition of the graves, and the arrangements of grave plots. All these observations are discussed to determine what they indicate about our cultural burial practices.

Religion's Response to Death. Handling religious beliefs about death, with a class of students from several religious backgrounds, can be sensitive. Kramer deals with the problem by having each student respond to a questionnaire which asks the student to describe his religion's view of life after death, death ceremonies, funeral practices, and burial customs. Students are encouraged to discuss their answers with their parents or their clergy. Students with no religious affiliation are asked to state their own views on the questions.

Kramer does not invite clergy or religious lay leaders as resource speakers; he feels it would be necessary to have all religions represented, and that would be too time-consuming. Instead, Kramer encourages, or in some instances assigns, students to interview a particular religious representative. Students then report the results of their interview to the class.

The Arts and Death. Although Kramer has not developed the arts and death topic completely, he does feel it is an important aspect of the total study of death. Each class has studied the poem, *Flanders Field*, and several students have done collateral reading of poetry and prose which relates to death. In the future, Kramer hopes to secure funds to rent some recent movies which deal with dying.

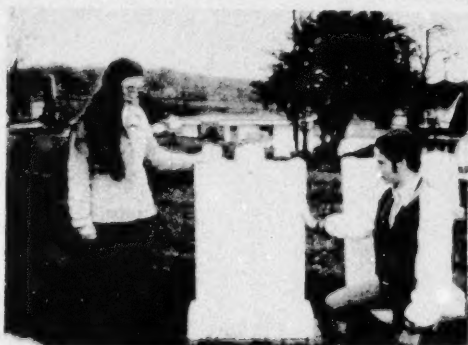
Mercy Death. After students have studied the five preceding topics, Kramer feels they are ready to tackle the subject of mercy death. Euthanasia is a delicate subject, and the teacher does not aim for a consensus. However, he does expose students to a variety of considerations about mercy death.

One aspect explored by the class is the role of medical personnel in life and death decisions. The family's responsibility to a terminally ill patient is considered, as is an individual's own right to request death.

An important resource speaker for the subject of mercy death and life prolongation is a social worker who works with terminally ill patients. Her firsthand experiences in relating to patients, families, and physicians brings considerable realism to the theoretical question.

In summarizing this unit, Kramer feels the curriculum encourages students to study many aspects of death and dying--to dispel myths and to understand realities. He writes, "We do not make humor out of death, neither do we become morbid in our

Students and teachers visit a local cemetery



(Photos by J. R. Crawford)

approach. At all times we attempt to treat the subject as a fact of life."

WHAT COMES AFTER DEATH?

What effect has the "Death and Dying" unit had on participants? In analyzing the pre- and post-questionnaires, Kramer has found some interesting consistency in students' responses. In some instances, students become less definite in their opinions. For example, on the subject of mercy death students tend to weigh more considerations after completing the unit; as a result they express fewer strong feelings about euthanasia.

One response which does not seem to change is a generally negative attitude toward funerals and funeral directors. Even after the visit of the funeral director--a visit students consider quite informative--most class members remain unconvinced of the value of funerals. Kramer feels that if students had their way "they would have their remains put in a paper sack and tossed into the river."

On a personal level, students indicate they feel less afraid of death as a result of the unit. One student believes that, without the unit, she could not have known anything about death until she was faced with a personal experience. Now, she writes, "I know what's involved and I'll be much more prepared for the future." A young man in the class considers the unit valuable in helping "kids face the fact that their parents will die someday, and they need to get their fear out into the open."

Ironically for many students, the study of death has resulted in an increased appreciation for life. Kramer reports that students often tell him they value living more and attempt to get more from life after taking the unit.

The teacher's role in dealing with a sensitive subject such as death is crucial. Kramer was aware of the potential for negative community reaction, but so far none has developed. Community citizens who have participated as speakers and resource contacts have been quite enthusiastic about the program.

As a classroom experience, Kramer feels the unit is as exciting as anything he teaches. In the spring 1974 semester, his enthusiasm was duplicated by a first-year teacher who also taught the unit. Barbara Sanford was impressed with the excitement shown by the students, but she was personally surprised that so few students had any firsthand experience with death. Almost none had been to a funeral home, attended a funeral, or even had a close friend or relative die.

After teaching the unit she feels two considerations are important in dealing with death education. "It is necessary to be sensitive to the feelings of others, and it is important to build an atmosphere of trust so students will feel free to either share or not share their feelings."

Overall, Kramer feels the high level of involvement displayed by students during the unit is one measure of their interest in the subject. Perhaps an even more significant measure is the continuing interest shown by students long after the unit is over. In describing his experiences, Kramer writes:

Many students who have already had the program will make a point to stop me in the hall or drop by my room to tell me about something they have either heard or read on the subject of death. This behavior has rarely been the case with any other subject or topic I have taught in 18 years. The impact is impressive.

DEATH EDUCATION QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Are you afraid to die?
2. What do you think of funerals?
3. Should there be a viewing?
4. Do you feel too much money is spent on funerals?
5. Do you believe in mercy killing?
6. What is your attitude toward burial?
7. Have you ever seen someone die?
8. Do you believe in life after death?
9. What does your religion say about death?
10. What is your attitude toward death as portrayed in literature and film?
11. How do you explain death to a child?
12. Are you curious about what dying is like?
13. Write your own epitaph.

For further information:

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WRITE:

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ERIC DOCUMENTS:

- ED 082 853: TALKING ABOUT DEATH WITH "NORMAL" CHILDREN (Research Issues). 6 pp. MF: \$.65, HC: \$1.50. This paper discusses the issues involved in a study of children's ideas about how these ideas relate to their cognitive development.
- ED 076 237: CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCE WITH DEATH. 22 pp. MF: \$.65, HC: \$1.50. The document describes the various reactions to death at various ages. It is noted that children's reactions to death are greatly influenced by past experiences.
- ED 075 728: LEARNING AND TEACHING ABOUT DEATH AND DYING. 18 pp. MF: \$.65, HC: \$1.50. This paper is divided into two parts; the first part is to organize the various dimensions of death education and the second includes an outline of a course on death education.

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